

March 14, 2003

To: NITC Commissioners

From: Anne Byers

Subject: Telehealth Network Update

Recent Telehealth Developments. On December 17, 2002, the Nebraska Public Service Commission approved the support of telehealth through the Nebraska Universal Service Fund. This decision significantly reduces the biggest barrier to the expansion of telehealth in Nebraska—the high cost of telecommunications line charges. New grant awards from the USDA Rural Utilities Service Distance Learning and Telemedicine program in 2002 will also expand the existing telehealth networks of Great Plains Regional Medical Center in North Platte and the Heartland Health Alliance network affiliated with Bryan LGH. Additionally, networks to respond to bioterrorism are in development. With significant expansion of telehealth networks anticipated within the next several years, 2003 presents a critical window of opportunity for the development of a coordinated, statewide telehealth vision and the coordination of telehealth networks.

Telehealth Network Plan Development. The Nebraska Public Service Commission has asked the Nebraska Hospital Association to submit a plan for the use of the Nebraska Universal Service Fund for telehealth support by April 1, 2003. The Nebraska Hospital Association with support from the Nebraska Information Technology Commission is developing a statewide telehealth network plan. The proposed network will allow all hospitals to interconnect with each other while also maintaining existing telehealth networks. The design effort will begin by taking the existing networks and configuring them into an optimized common network. Common applications will be agreed upon. Applications will be standards-based and will utilize commercially available products that offer low maintenance cost and easy operation. Bandwidth requirements will be developed based on existing and planned use. A draft plan will be presented to the Telehealth Network Plan Steering Committee on March 20. The steering committee consists of representatives from all existing telehealth networks, rural hospitals, HHS, the NITC, and the Nebraska Hospital Association. An initial plan will be presented to the Public Service Commission by April 1.